



NEWS RELEASE

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IAF PRESIDENT ADDRESSES THE HEMISPHERE'S MAYORS

ARLINGTON, Va. — Inter-American Foundation President David Valenzuela was the keynote speaker at the Seventh Annual Inter-American Conference of Mayors and Local Authorities on Tuesday, June 26, in Miami.

More than 700 mayors and other municipal officials from the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean heard Valenzuela's address, "Governance in the Americas: An Overview of Where We Are and Where We Must Go," signaling the advent of elected local government in Latin America and analyzing the elements essential to its success.

Speaking in Spanish, Valenzuela began by noting the region's recent departure from its tradition whereby presidents appointed municipal officials. Calling decentralization in Latin America and the Caribbean a "window of opportunity," Valenzuela said, "This is the sixth year I have attended this conference. The reason for my participation is my conviction that one of the reasons for the persistent social and economic underdevelopment in Latin

America and the Caribbean is the absence of a solid and participatory system of local government.

“Citizen participation is the first ingredient in the success of a good local government. I’m referring to participation in the decision-making, in the definition of priorities, or in how to allocate the budget. A municipality that has an organized citizenry, capable of intervening in the deliberative process, is on the road to development. Democracy works when people feel they have power and that their opinions count. As if by magic, municipal budgets for small works multiply exponentially when citizens are co-participants in the decisions and add their own efforts and resources to the task.

“This is the era of strategic partnerships. Local governments must become masters at strategic alliances. Potential allies are other municipalities, nongovernmental organizations, businesses or businessmen’s associations, community organizations, unions, foundations, universities, religious groups, churches, clubs, professional associations, banks, ethnic groups, regional and national governments, international organizations, sister cities in other countries, small producers. The secret of good partnerships is trust and the fact that everyone stands to gain from the relationship.

“Besides bringing ideas and expertise, partnerships mobilize resources from members and other sources. Each project that a municipality must carry out is the result of mobilizing resources. The municipality does not have to be the only contributor to a project. Once a project is defined, through, of course, a participatory process, the financing phase begins in which all partners to the initiative must participate.

“Finally, I would like to say something about transparency. One of the main arguments heard in central government turns on municipal government’s incompetence and vulnerability to corruption, which is used as an excuse to stop the processes of decentralization and transfer of resources. This is a serious threat to a country’s stability and the prospects of consolidating democracy.

Moreover, if citizens can't trust local authorities, they can trust the central government even less.

"To conclude, I want to turn to the subject of leadership. Mayors, city council chairs, council members and other authorities elected by the citizenry play a key role in the democratic transformation and consolidation of Latin America and the Caribbean. It is you who must break the traditional patterns of vertical, authoritarian governments and become leaders and facilitators of participation, efforts at consensus and citizen empowerment. A leader is not a boss who commands but a mobilizer of opinions, a visionary who persuades others to join in a task for the common good, a promoter of ideas and a motivator of creativity. Leaders don't assume power; they exercise power by giving it to others. They are forgers of alliances and mediators of conflict. They guide by their example and are respected for their actions, not their words.

"I firmly believe democracy is forged from the bottom up. The challenge is great, but the alternatives have been exhausted and we can't let pass by this opportunity history has given us, letting the window close without at least making an effort."

Later at the conference Valenzuela moderated an IAF-sponsored panel on the relationship between local governments, civil society and the private sector. The panel featured two Latin American presenters: Manuel Chiriboga of Ecuador, director of an association of 42 Latin American NGOs, and Elio Villaseñor, director of one of Mexico's largest NGOs.

Valenzuela has served IAF since 1979. IAF was created by Congress in 1969 to provide assistance directly to the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is the only U.S. government agency directly supporting self-help projects designed by poor people's organizations. Since 1971, IAF has funded more than 4,300 such projects throughout the region, many of them partnerships with non-governmental organizations, municipalities, universities, and local and multi-national businesses.

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***Para clarificación en español o más detalles, llame al 703-306-4357.
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